

# Does Holbrook's Nostalgia Index Measure Nostalgia Proneness?

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## ABSTRACT

This research highlights the conceptual limitations of Holbrook's Nostalgia Index: it conflates the cause (nostalgia) with the consequence (preference); it does not consider nostalgia as an emotion; and it opposes the past to the present and future. Hence, Holbrook's Nostalgia Index measures belief in decline, not nostalgia proneness.

**Keywords:** *nostalgia, nostalgia proneness, attitude toward the past, belief in decline*

## Introduction

Nostalgia is a concept that has generated interest in marketing since the seminal articles of Belk (1990), Havlena and Holak (1991), and Holbrook and Schindler (1991). The intuition of these pioneers regarding the importance of nostalgia in marketing has never been refuted. Indeed, the nostalgia generated by an ad has a positive impact on one's attitude towards it (e.g. Muehling and Sprott 2004), one's involvement towards it (e.g. Muehling and Pascal 2012), one's attitude towards the brand (e.g. Pascal, Sprott, and Muehling 2002), one's attitude towards the product (e.g. Bambauer-Sachse and Gierl 2009) and one's intention to purchase (e.g. Marchegiani and Phau 2011).

Beyond its role in advertising, nostalgia has a positive impact on one's intention to purchase products stemming from one's personal past (Sierra and McQuitty 2007), one's charitable intentions and behaviors (Ford and Merchant 2010; Merchant, Ford, and Rose 2011; Zhou et al. 2012b) and the image of a brand linked to the past (Zimmer, Little, and Griffiths 1999), and a negative impact on Internet use (Reisenwitz et al. 2007). This impact could apply to all types of products stemming from the past (Schindler and Holbrook 2003), which makes nostalgia proneness a potential segmentation variable in many markets (Holbrook and Schindler 1996; Schindler and Holbrook 2003).

Research on nostalgia owes a great deal to Holbrook, who proposed that certain individuals are more prone to feeling nostalgia than others. He created a psychographic variable, "nostalgia proneness", and developed a scale to measure it, the "Nostalgia Index" (Holbrook 1993, 1994). This scale

measures a preference for things of the past, in relation to the present and future, as per Holbrook and Schindler's (1991) definition of nostalgia. Nostalgia proneness was quickly referred to as "attitude towards the past" (Holbrook and Schindler 1994). Both terms were then used synonymously (Holbrook and Schindler 1996; Schindler and Holbrook 2003).

The idea that nostalgia proneness, as measured by Holbrook's Nostalgia Index (Holbrook 1993, 1994), influences preferences for products of the past was empirically supported. For example, consumers whose nostalgia proneness is high tend to prefer movies released when they were younger, in this case around their late teens (19 years old). As for those whose nostalgia proneness is low, they tend to prefer movies released in their late twenties (28 years old) (Holbrook and Schindler 1996). Similar results emerged for preferences towards movie stars (Holbrook and Schindler 1994) and cars (Schindler and Holbrook 2003). These studies thus support the idea that nostalgia proneness has a moderating influence on the relationship between age and preference for products from the past.

Holbrook's Nostalgia Index is the most popular nostalgia proneness measurement scale in marketing; however, it is based on a definition of nostalgia as a preference for objects from the past (Holbrook and Schindler 1991), which is marginal to the other definitions in the literature. Furthermore, this view of nostalgia conflates the cause (nostalgia) and consequences (preferences). In addition, this index opposes the past to the present and future, an idea that now seems outdated. Finally, this scale seems multidimensional while

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no theoretical element suggests that the concept it is supposed to measure is. We thus believe that Holbrook's Nostalgia Index does not measure nostalgia proneness, but rather the belief in decline, as subsequently implicitly recognized (Schindler and Holbrook 2003).

The purpose of this study is to highlight the conceptual limitations of Holbrook's Nostalgia Index in measuring nostalgia proneness. We suggest to use a more adapted scale, the *Southampton Nostalgia Scale* (Routledge et al. 2008), but nevertheless suggest developing a marketing-specific nostalgia proneness measurement scale. We conclude by distinguishing the stimulus (e.g., product linked to the past) and potential response (nostalgia) and its consequences (e.g., preferences).

### **Nostalgia According to Holbrook and Schindler: A Marginal Conceptualization**

In marketing, most authors agree on the emotional nature of nostalgia, by considering it as an emotion, feeling or mood (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Belk 1990; Holak and Havlena 1998; Madrigal and Boerstler 2007; Stern 1992; Summers, Johnson, and McColl-Kennedy 2001). Also, in psychology, almost all authors consider nostalgia as an emotion (e.g., Hepper et al. 2012; Routledge et al. 2008; Sedikides et al. 2008). A notable exception to this interdisciplinary quasi-consensus is Holbrook and Schindler's (1991) definition, which considers nostalgia as a preference (towards objects from the past).

Apart from this exception, nostalgia has been considered an ambivalent bittersweet emotion since the beginning in marketing (Belk 1990; Havlena and Holak 1991). Indeed, nostalgia involves both pleasant memories and the awareness of loss, the inaccessible character of an idealized past. The emotional complexity of nostalgia is emphasized by Holak and Havlena (1998) who show that nostalgia is linked to both positive emotions such as joy, affection and gratitude, and negative or mitigated emotions such as sadness and desire. Also, in a study on nostalgia generated by music, Barrett et al. (2010) show that nostalgia is linked to both joy and sadness. Other studies specify that the affective signature of nostalgia, be it mitigated, is mainly positive (Hepper et al. 2012; Wildschut et al. 2006). In addition, in the narratives analyzed by Wildschut et al. (2006), negative elements were combined with positive elements to build a redemption narrative that progresses from negative to positive.

Nostalgia is usually linked to a desire to go back in the past or relive it (Davis 1979; Holak and Havlena 1998). The past is distant and inaccessible, which increases consumer desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). Furthermore, the past, or rather the idealized souvenir of it, is familiar and comfort-

ing. Just like the future, the past offers a striking contrast with the present, but without requiring an effort of imagination, and, especially, without risking the creation of anxiety. From this perspective, nostalgia is an emotion that helps us to stay connected with our past, and it is thus now widely considered as contributing to people's psychological well-being (e.g., Iyer and Jetten 2011; Juhl et al. 2010; Routledge et al. 2011; Sedikides et al. 2008; Wildschut et al. 2010; Zhou et al. 2008).

The current conceptual quasi-consensus can be summarized as follows: nostalgia is "*a complex emotion that involves past-oriented cognition and a mixed-affective signature (...)*" (Hepper et al. 2012); however, Holbrook and Schindler's (1991) definition: "*a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) towards objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)*" remains a conceptual reference in marketing (see, e.g., Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010). From our perspective, this definition has one important limitation: it conflates the cause (nostalgia) with the consequences (preferences). Additionally, nostalgia is not considered as an emotion and the past is opposed to the present. However, it is at the basis of the development of Holbrook's Nostalgia Index.

### **Holbrook's Nostalgia Index: From Nostalgia Proneness to Belief in Decline**

Nostalgia research pioneers in marketing all based themselves on Davis' (1979) conceptualization of nostalgia (Belk 1990; Havlena and Holak 1991; Holbrook and Schindler 1991). Holbrook's (1993, 1994) Nostalgia Index was then developed according to this same conceptual basis; however, Davis (1979) considers that nostalgia is not only linked to an attraction to the past but also to negative feelings or a disdain for the present and concern for the future (see also Nawas and Platt 1965). So, Holbrook's Nostalgia Index was developed according to the idea that nostalgia is the same as thinking that the past is better than the present and the present is better than the future (see Table 1). In doing so, Holbrook's nostalgia proneness scale forces a comparison between the past and present (e.g.: "*Things used to be better in the good old days*") and the present and future (e.g.: "*Technological change will ensure a brighter future*"; reverse coded). We thus believe that Holbrook's Nostalgia Index measures beliefs that the passage of time is linked to a decline, as implicitly recognized in a subsequent study (Schindler and Holbrook 2003); however, this view of nostalgia, which implies a conscious comparison between the past and present, as well as the present and future, and, by transitivity, between the past and future, seems inadequate now.

**Table 1.** Holbrook's Nostalgia Index (8 items version)

1. They don't make 'em like they used to.
2. Things used to be better in the good old days.
3. Products are getting shoddier and shoddier.
4. Technological change will ensure a brighter future. (reverse coded)
5. History involves a steady improvement in human welfare. (reverse coded)
6. We are experiencing a decline in the quality of life.
7. Steady growth in GNP has brought increased human happiness. (reverse coded)
8. Modern business constantly builds a better tomorrow. (reverse coded)

Source: Holbrook and Schindler (1994).

According to Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), an individual can be oriented towards both the past and future, and his psychological well-being can be linked to a balanced time perspective between the past, present and future. Future orientation allows individuals to reach their goals, past orientation allows individuals to stay connected with their roots and provides a foundation to their personal identity, and present orientation allows individuals to enjoy life's pleasures (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999). The idea that past orientation is not opposed to future and present orientation is also supported by Spears and Amos (2012). Furthermore, in Batcho's (1995) study, people who are very nostalgic evaluate the world in which they lived in when they were younger more favorably than people who are not very nostalgic, but their evaluation of the present-day world and the world they anticipate for the future (20 years later) does not vary significantly. These results, confirmed in a subsequent study (Batcho 1998), suggest that nostalgia does not necessarily involve a rejection of the present, or a negative attitude towards the future, which would correspond more to pessimism (Batcho 1995). Similarly, Godbole, Shehryar and Hunt (2006) show that the outlook on the future does not have a direct impact on nostalgia. Our point of view, according to which nostalgia is not necessarily linked to a negative attitude towards the present or future, is consistent with the current conceptualization of nostalgia. Indeed, it is seen as an emotion that is not only mainly positive, but that also contributes to a person's psychological (e.g., Iyer and Jetten 2011) and even physiological well-being (Zhou et al. 2012a), and constitutes a true existential resource (e.g., Routledge et al. 2011).

Moreover, Holbrook's Nostalgia Index would be multi-dimensional. Although the original version with 20 items showed satisfactory reliability (Holbrook 1994), confirmatory factor analyses yielded disappointing results for a one-dimensional model (Holbrook 1993; Holbrook and Schindler 1994). This led authors to propose an eight-item version of

the scale; however, three studies suggest that the reduced scale would be two-dimensional. The factor analysis conducted by Rindfleisch, Freeman and Burroughs (2000) revealed two factors. A first factor reflects product-specific "nostalgia" (e.g.: "*Products are getting shoddier and shoddier*") and a second factor reflects "nostalgia" regarding life in general (e.g.: "*History involves a steady improvement in human welfare*"; reverse coded). The studies led by Reisenwitz, Iyer and Cutler (2004) and Reisenwitz and Iyer (2007) yielded a similar result: a "micro" factor, also called "individual nostalgia proneness" and a "macro" factor, also called "societal nostalgia proneness". If the Holbrook's Nostalgia Index measured nostalgia proneness, the two-dimensionality of this construct would require a theoretical explanation, absent from the literature to our knowledge.

We suggest distinguishing five concepts: nostalgia proneness; attitude towards the past; attitude towards the present; attitude towards the future and belief in decline. Belief in decline can be defined as a positive attitude towards the past, a negative attitude towards the present and an increasingly negative attitude towards the future. Moreover, having a negative attitude towards the present might be being unhappy and having a negative attitude towards the future is probably linked to pessimism. As for nostalgia, it would not necessarily involve a conscious evaluation of the past, present and future when it occurs. In other words, we do not think that believing in decline is the same thing as being prone to nostalgia. It is worth noting that believing in decline is not related to being attracted to things from the past, as measured by scales stemming from environmental psychology (Schindler and Holbrook 2003). Additionally, Holbrook's Nostalgia Index is not correlated to Batcho's (1995) nostalgia inventory (Batcho 2007; Batcho et al. 2008), which is a scale established in psychology (Routledge et al. 2008).

### A Measurement Scale for Each Concept

Marketing research needs a valid nostalgia proneness measurement scale. Holak, Havlena and Matveev (2006) developed the "Index of Nostalgia-Proneness", which measures one's attitude towards the past, beliefs that the passage of time is linked to a decline and willingness to go back to the past. This scale shares the same conceptual origin as Holbrook's (1993, 1994) Nostalgia Index, and thus the same limitations previously discussed. As for Batcho's (1995) nostalgia inventory, it helps to determine how much respondents miss certain elements from the past (toys, television shows, carelessness, society as it was...), but only measures one aspect of nostalgia that then appeared to be a complex emotion (Wildschut et al. 2006).

Given this absence of a nostalgia proneness measurement scale in the literature, Routledge et al. (2008) developed the

*Southampton Nostalgia Scale* (SNS). It is composed of 5 statements that mainly measure the frequency at which an individual feels nostalgia, and thus constitutes a direct measurement of nostalgia proneness (see Table 2). It is correlated with other related scales, namely, Batcho’s (1995) nostalgia inventory and a subset of 8 statements of the *Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory* (ZTPI) (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999) used by Routledge et al. (2008) as a measurement of one’s attitude towards the past. The SNS has a satisfactory internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, whose value ranges from 0.84 to 0.93 in five studies (Barrett et al. 2010; Juhl et al. 2010; Routledge et al. 2008). It is worth noting that, contrary to other nostalgia proneness measurement scales, the SNS is the only one that includes the word *nostalgia* in its statements. However, giving a definition to nostalgia or not before administering the scale yields similar results (Hepper et al. 2012; Wildschut et al. 2006; Wildschut et al. 2010). This can be explained by the fact that the lay conceptions that people have regarding what nostalgia is are rather consistent with the way in which nostalgia has been considered over the last several years in psychology (Hepper et al. 2012) and marketing. It is an emotion linked to the past, which is not pathological in any way, and which differs from homesickness.

We believe that the scales existing in the literature measure three concepts: nostalgia proneness, measured by the SNS (Routledge et al. 2008); attitude towards the past, measured by the “*Past-Positive*” and “*Past-Negative*” dimensions of the ZTPI (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999); and belief in decline, measured by Holbrook’s Nostalgia Index (Holbrook, 1993, 1994) or the Index of Nostalgia-Proneness of Holak, Havlena and Matveev (2006). These three constructs are probably linked. Especially, a positive attitude towards the past could be linked to nostalgia proneness (Godbole et al. 2006; Zimbardo and Boyd 1999). Furthermore, belief in decline should be linked to one’s attitude towards the past given that this attitude is included in the belief in decline. In fact, one’s intention to purchase a product linked to the past

could be influenced by emotional and cognitive factors simultaneously (Sierra and McQuitty 2007). Attitude towards the past and belief in decline are two cognitive factors likely to influence the consumption of products from the past. Nostalgia proneness is an emotional factor. Further research is needed to examine which of these constructs influences consumer behavior the most.

Conclusion

Nostalgia has very recently generated renewed interest in marketing (e.g., Cattaneo and Guerini 2012; Marchegiani and Phau 2013 ; Muehling 2013; Muehling and Pascal 2012; Orth and Gal 2012; Zhou et al. 2012b). This may be partly due to a similar renewal in psychology, initiated a few years earlier by Sedikides, Wildschut and Baden (2004), and then by Wildschut et al (2006); however, the very recent reactivity of our discipline should not conceal the fact that marketing leadership on empirical nostalgia research, recognized in psychology until recently (see Wildschut et al. 2006), may belong to the past. Worse yet, advances in knowledge on nostalgia are at stake.

To improve comprehension on the impact of nostalgia on consumer behavior, a valid nostalgia proneness measurement scale must be used. We believe that only one exists now in the literature, the *Southampton Nostalgia Scale* (Routledge et al. 2008); however, a scale that is better suited to marketing should be developed. For example, it may be relevant to develop a product-specific nostalgia proneness measurement, like the product-specific innovativeness construct developed by Goldsmith and Hofacker (1991). More importantly, this new scale should incorporate the fundamental idea that one can be nostalgic of an era that one has not experienced.

Indeed, since the conceptualization of Havlena and Holak (1991) and of Holbrook and Schindler (1991), there was a consensus in marketing on one essential point: one can be nostalgic of an era that one has not experienced *directly*;

Table 2. Southampton Nostalgia Scale

1. How often do you experience nostalgia?	Very rarely - Very frequently
2. How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?	Not at all - Very much
3. Generally speaking, how often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences?	Very rarely - Very frequently
4. Specifically, how often do you bring to mind nostalgic experiences?	At least once a day / Three to four times a week / Approximately twice a week / Approximately once a week / Once or twice a month / Once every couple of months / Once or twice a year /
5. How important is it for you to bring to mind nostalgic experiences?	Not at all - Very much

Source: Routledge et al. (2008).



however this consensus was recently broken by Zhou et al. (2012b) who specify, from the first sentence of the summary of their article, that the object of nostalgia is “a personally experienced and valued past”. This conceptualization, stemming from the field of psychology, denies the idea that one can be nostalgic of a past experienced indirectly through books, songs, movies, parents, grandparents, etc. Such a narrow definition of nostalgia risks limiting the advances in knowledge.

Before developing a new nostalgia proneness measurement scale, conceptual work thus seems necessary. Accurate semantics should first be used. Words such as “nostalgic product” (e.g., Loveland et al. 2010), “nostalgic brand” (e.g., Orth and Gal 2012), “nostalgic ad” (e.g., Muehling and Pascal 2012), “nostalgic preference” (e.g., Holbrook 1993), “nostalgic attachment” (e.g., Schindler and Holbrook 2003) “nostalgia purchase” (e.g., Sierra and McQuitty 2007), and “nostalgic association” (e.g., Cattaneo and Guerini 2012) are likely to cause confusion. Indeed, only a human being can be nostalgic. These words conflate the stimulus (product, brand or ad linked to the past) with the potential response (nostalgia) and its consequences (preferences, attachment and purchase). Instead, we suggest distinguishing three concepts: the perceived age of the object (product, brand or ad), nostalgia felt, and attitudinal or behavioral response. The nostalgia felt would be considered a mediator variable. Nostalgia proneness, as well as one’s attitude towards the past and belief in decline, would be potential moderator variables.

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